

Myths and Realities of Immigration

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The U.S. is the primary destination for the world's refugees and immigrants.

The U.S. accounts for less than 1% of the world's migrants, both legal and illegal. Undocumented immigrants make up just 30% of all foreign born people in the U.S. While many are Hispanic, they can come from almost anywhere. For instance, there are an estimated 50,000 Irish and 500,000 other undocumented European immigrants living and working in the U.S.

Undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes.

Immigrants pay taxes in the form of property and sales taxes and other consumption taxes at the federal and state level. The majority of state and local costs of schooling and other services are funded by these taxes. The Social Security Administration estimates that three quarters of undocumented immigrants pay income taxes, and that they contribute \$6-7 billion in Social Security funds that they will never be able to claim. It's also estimated that these immigrants contribute nearly \$1.5 billion in Medicare taxes for programs they'll never be able to use.

Undocumented immigrants come here to take welfare and they use a disproportionate amount of government services.

Undocumented immigrants come to the United States almost exclusively to work and they use government services at very low rates. The employment rate of undocumented immigrants is typically higher than that for U.S. citizens or legal immigrants. Moreover, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, and most other public benefits. One study found that immigrants earn about \$240 billion a year, pay \$90 billion in taxes, and use about \$5 billion in community services. Despite their hard work, the average income for undocumented immigrants is 40% less than the average legal immigrant or U.S.-born American family.

Immigrants take jobs and opportunities away from Americans and lower wages for native-born workers.

Studies show that overall, undocumented immigration either has no effect on U.S.-born workers or actually increases their labor market opportunities by boosting the industries that create new jobs. The National Academy of Sciences found that undocumented immigrants lower overall wages by less than 1%. But there is a connection between concentrations of undocumented workers and wages in some jobs. Approximately 96% of working age migrants employed in the U.S. work in sectors that most native-born workers now avoid. Most immigrant workers are concentrated in a limited number of industries such as agriculture, construction, the hospitality industry, and food preparation (the most dangerous and lowest paying jobs). Having a large group of workers with few legal rights, and with little ability to enforce those rights they do have, has helped some industries lower wages and working conditions to levels where only people who are desperate for work will fill the jobs.

Undocumented immigrants are breaking the law.

Many immigration violations are civil offenses. There are many other common civil offenses. For instance, people who copy and share copyrighted music are committing civil offenses, and could face thousands of dollars in fines. Labeling immigrants as lawbreakers penalizes the individual rather than recognizing the larger economic and political forces at play. Each year, only 10,000 visas are available to low-skilled immigrant workers, while the market hires 450,000 low-skilled immigrant workers every year.

Undocumented immigrants raise crime rates in the United States.

Immigrants appear to raise crime rates only when immigration violations are included in crime statistics. Most sentences being served by immigrants are short, indicating that their offenses are mostly not violent.

Migrants send the majority of their money home and therefore don't contribute to our economy.

Although migrants from Mexico do send \$2 billion a year home in remittances, they also fuel economic growth here. Undocumented migrants from Mexico spend the vast majority of the \$122 billion they earn in the U.S.

Immigrants are taking over the United States and don't want to learn English.

Only 4.3% of all workers in the United States are undocumented immigrants. The amount of immigration that we are seeing today is not unprecedented. Actually, the percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born now stands at less than 12%, compared to 15% in the early 20th century. Just like today, a century ago immigrants were often concentrated in homogenous neighborhoods, and spoke their native languages. Back at the turn of the 20th century, it was the Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants (among others) who were called “drunk, lazy, and dissolute.” Now this xenophobic stereotype is applied to others. Non-Hispanic whites will remain the majority in this country for the foreseeable future.

While over 80% of immigrants don't speak English at home, more than 75% do speak English within 10 years of arrival. Most non-English speaking immigrants want to learn the language. In fact, demand among immigrants for adult English classes far exceeds the existing supply.

There are acceptable channels for coming to the U.S. legally and immigrants should wait in line like so many of our parents and grandparents did.

For most migrants and immigrants, especially those coming for economic reasons, there is simply no line to wait in. There are 4 main categories through which people may gain a lawful permanent resident status, or a green card, in the U.S.:

- through a close family member who is a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident
- through an employer or special skill
- through a special lottery of extra visas
- through a special category for protected classes of people (i.e., refugees or political asylees)

If a person does fit in one of these categories and meets other eligibility requirements, they can begin the often very long process of obtaining a green card. Most who have this option do wait. For those who don't fit into one of these categories, there is essentially no line to wait in that will ever grant them legal status.

Prior to WWII, most immigrants entered the U.S. without documents, so if you were born in the United States, it's very possible that your family members were once undocumented immigrants themselves and would not have qualified for entry under the current laws.

Undocumented migration has been tied to terrorism. Funding the militarization of our southern border keeps migrants out and keeps us safe.

The 9-11 hijackers all entered legally and none of them came through the Mexican border. Moreover, there is no connection between the motives that guided the people behind the 9-11 attacks and those that propel undocumented, economically motivated immigrants from Latin America to enter the U.S.

The \$20 billion that has been spent on militarizing the border in the past decades has had no considerable effect on immigration levels. From 1986 to 1998 the Border Patrol's budget increased six-fold and the number of agents doubled. During that time, the number of undocumented immigrants also doubled. The fence along the border has done little more than push migrants into the desert causing the number of deaths to rise. No border enforcement strategy will be effective in keeping immigrants out unless it is combined with policies that address the push and pull factors that compel immigrants here.

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